PROFILE

THE SMITHEREENS

You've Heard the LP, Now See The Book

Ask Dennis Diken about the recording of *Smithereens 11*, the third and latest LP from the Cataret, New Jersey quartet, and the drummer is as liable to tell you about how the band heard of actor Jim Backus' (Mr Magoo, Thurston Howell III) passing the night they recorded "Blue Period"—one of ten songs on *Smithereens 11*—as he is about mic technique or any other recording intricacies.

It's been an eventful year for the Smithereens—and for more reasons than the passing of some cultural heros (Backus and Jay Ward, creator of, among other cartoon characters, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*) and the lengthy (by Smithereens standards) recording of their current album. Since the *Green Thoughts* tour ended last Halloween at the Beacon Theater there's been a marriage, Diken's, and a birth (a son Max) to lead guitarist Jim Babjak and his wife. Clearly it's been a time to become more domesticated and to take stock of the road they've travelled so far.

"Being a music fan as a kid and now being on the other side of the fence is quite a kick," says Diken, between bites of breakfast one recent Manhattan morning. "We get mail saying how somebody's breaking up with their girlfriend and how a certain song got them through a real hard period. We even got a letter saying a guy was contemplating suicide and that somehow, because he kept listening to the song "Cigarette" from our first album, he got through that period."

Diken ends the story with a quizzical look, as if to say perhaps he's sounding too profound. He changes the mood by pulling out a picture of Babjak's new baby. "It's from the christening," he says, sounding every bit the proud uncle—and shifting topics to the album at hand.

Like *Green Thoughts*, *Smithereens 11* is rich in heavily amplified Rickenbacker guitars and rife with principle songwriter (and singer/guitarist) Pat Dinizio's penchant for using the word "girl" in his song titles. But where they once seemed totally enamored with The Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon" period, the guiding influence this time out appears to be the early, optimistic period of The Beach Boys' career, before Brian Wilson got drunk on "California Dreamin'". By far the biggest change though, came in the producer's chair, where the band chose to move from Don Dixon to the harder rocking Ed Stasium.

"A funny aside," says Diken, explaining the change, "is that Pat used to go to a music store in Scotch Plains, New Jersey when he was a kid where there was this guitar that he really dug and where Ed just happened to work and Ed was the guy who used to let Pat play that guitar whenever he wanted to, even though it was an expensive guitar that Pat could never afford."

The band as a whole met Stasium at the behest of a mutual friend, Mark Freid at BMI, in the autumn of 1988, when Enigma Records, the band's first label, was preparing to reissue The Smithereens' 1983 EP *Beauty and Sadness*.

"We knew that Ed worked with The Ramones and a couple of other people we dug, so we asked him to re-mix *Beauty and Sadness*. We liked the job he did, so we said, 'Let's try him on the new album.'"

The combination of working with Stasium as well as within a much less constricting time frame—five weeks this time, as opposed to *Green Thoughts*, which was recorded and mixed in sixteen days and *Especially For You*, completed in only ten, allowed the band plenty of room to try different things. Specifically, the two weeks the band spent in pre-production rehearsals was another first for the band.

At this point, Jim Babjak arrives, late, because the car that was supposed to pick him up and bring him into the city never arrived. Nevertheless, he jumps right in.

"In the past, I always wanted to do spontaneous things in the studio, solos especially," explained Babjak. "What I did during these rehearsals was concentrate on the structures of the songs so that while I still kept it somewhat spontaneous in the studio, I did have at least a rough outline of what kind of solos I'd do."

"Taking the additional time to rehearse the material," injects Diken, "didn't change the way we'd approach playing. What it did was strengthen the arrangements."

Like "Especially for You" from *Green Thoughts*, Babjak and Dinizio collaborated on "Cut Flowers," a song Babjak began to write and that the band's main tunesmith completed. "People tell me it's a combination of The Zombies and the early Bee Gee's," says Babjak before my joke that Dinizio might be forcing him into the role of George Harrison, to which Diken mischievously counters: "Jimmy's more like the Denny Payton of the Dave Clark Five."

"I'm getting better at songwriting," says Babjak, good-naturedly rising to his own defense, suggesting that his principle flaw is that, "I don't stick to the classic formula of verse, chorus, and bridge,"—a very noticable departure when you're in a band that works within the guise of the three minute pop song."

Trivia buffs might be interested in knowing that while the title *Smithereens 11* is a play on the title of the rat pack film *Ocean's Eleven*, the actual album cover photo is a recreation not of the original movie poster, but of the cover of the paperback novelization of the classic film, which Diken actually owns.

Some amount of controversy accompanied the photo shoot for the cover as band members haggled over who got to be the Sammy Davis, Jr. character. For the record, Diken won. Babjak is Dean Martin, bassist Mike Mesaros, who was in Candlestick Park when the San Francisco earthquake hit, is Joey Bishop, and Dinizio, as seems only fitting for an Italian lad from Jersey, is Sinatra. ❐

Danny McCue